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SUBJECT: TAJIKISTAN'S WOMEN'S COLONY, PRISON OR PARADISE?

REF: DUSHANBE 0208

CLASSIFIED BY: Richard E. Hoagland, Ambassador, State, State.
REASON: 1.4 (d)

11. (U) Nestled in the mountains near the Nurek dam, one hour from Dushanbe, Tajikistan's sole women's prison is far more sanitary and progressive than men's prisons. The manicured gardens, relatively clean buildings, holiday activities and good management attempt to mask the sub-standard conditions common throughout Tajik prisons.

12. (U) PolOff accompanied Swiss Cooperation Office (SCO) representatives to Tajikistan's Women's Colony March 14, the second Embassy prison visit this year. Some 600 women reside in the overcrowded prison, 70% of whom were convicted of drug trafficking. The director of the prison was eager to show off his well-maintained prison and its "happy" tenants. He repeatedly asked PolOff what she thought of the prison and was keen on making sure all visitors were satisfied with the prison conditions. One SCO officer told PolOff this particular director is a unique in Tajikistan's penitentiary system and truly cares about providing hospitable conditions for the women.

13. (C) Deputy Minister of Justice, Lieutenant General Izzatullo Sharipov, Head of the Tajik Penitentiary system is attempting to make over Tajikistan's prisons. Despite his reputation for cruelty and corruption (reftel), he has reached out to select international organizations for assistance, although pointedly excluding the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). SCO officer told PolOff Sharipov is attempting to regain status with President Rahmonov. Sharipov was allegedly involved in drug trafficking and entangled in a court case in Moscow. President Rahmonov appointed Sharipov to his current position as a demotion and now Sharipov is working to regain Rahmonov's good graces. Post's Senior Law Enforcement Agent relayed that Tajik Border Guard's head General-Colonel Saidimir Zuhurov noted Sharipov played an "important" role in eliminating opposition fighters during the civil war. (COMMENT: A somewhat dubious distinction, given the heavy-handed way many opposition forces were defeated, but an understandable reason why Rahmonov may feel a sense of loyalty to Sharipov. END COMMENT.)

BETTER FACILITIES, BUT STILL SUBSTANDARD

¶4. (U) The women's prison affords its tenants more facilities than men's prisons. The prison has a small mosque for Muslims and a few rooms for practicing Christians. Approximately 80 women regularly attend mosque. Two local Christian missionary groups converted 60 women while in prison, engage them in bible classes and organize holiday festivities. An on-site library with old Soviet books and newspapers donated by SCO is open to the women. Women who bear children while in prison are allowed to live in separate quarters with their children up to three years of age. Some women can elect to work in a small textiles factory on site. Local companies commission the prisons with projects such as sewing traditional Tajik dress or military uniforms. The women are not forced to work in the factory. They do not earn a salary, only a 30 somoni (\$10) credit per month to use at the prison's convenience store.

¶5. (U) Although the women's facility is better than other prisons in Tajikistan, the conditions are nowhere near Western standards. The prison's director commented that Tajikistan is such an impoverished country, upgrading prison facilities is one of the government's last priorities. Approximately 100 women share bunk beds in a large sleeping room with no heat. The sewage system is broken and waste seeps above ground in the nearby village. The medical wing of the prison is clean and far more sanitary than Tajikistan's hospital for inmates (reftel). However, problems remain. PolOff observed medicine donated by Sweden scattered across the floor of one room and instruments were not sterilized. Nurek's distance from Dushanbe means that prisoners are treated on site and cannot be transported to a city hospital. Out of the 40 state employees who run the prison, only eight are women. In the past year, three men have been dismissed due to improper conduct, including rape and sexual molestation. The deputy director of the prison stressed the need for more female employees.

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¶6. (SBU) COMMENT: This visit is the second of what we hope will be regular routine visits by Embassy officials. Post has recommended that Project Hope allocate some of its medical supplies and humanitarian assistance to the penitentiary system's hospital in May, as General Sharipov requested. However, the assistance will depend on continued monitoring and building a relationship of trust and transparency. We hope this could open the door to better relations with all relevant international organizations, including the ICRC. END COMMENT.
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